

TD's Top Ten for 2020

It was the year of COVID-19, but all that stay-at-home time at least made for a lot of music listening! And despite the disappearance of the live music scene, a bumper crop of recorded tunes emerged. Our musician friends are acutely feeling the loss of revenue from touring, so I encourage one and all to dig deep for the Holidays. As a result, my usual list of my favorite otherwise low-profile artists has expanded just a bit for your Holiday gift giving pleasure....

This was also the year of the African American Woman (all praise Kamala, Stacey, and their Sisters in Getting Out the Vote). Accordingly, my favorite releases of the year are from two African American stars on the horizon. Let me introduce you to [Sierra Green & The Soul Machine](#) from New Orleans, named *Off Beat Magazine's* Best of the Beat's Best Emerging Artist for 2020 and [Vanessa Collier's](#) *Heart on the Line* (recipient of the Best Instrumentalist – Horn at this year's Blues Music Awards). Both discs are self-released and most definitely worthy of your attention. Now that they're getting some well-deserved public recognition, they'll be too famous to appear on this list again, so enjoy them now!

Here are the rest of my top picks for 2020, in alpha order:

Bandé Gamboa *Horizonte* www.heavenly-sweetness.com

An instant cure for the Winter blahs. From the first notes, you'll be compelled to get up and move. Captivating combination of two all-star bands, one from Guinea Bissau, the other from Cabo Verde (3 *singers each*) inspired by Amilcar Cabral, a key figure in the liberation struggles of both countries. For fans of old skool Ghanaian Highlife, check out *Alewa* from **Santrofi** (www.outhere.de). From the streets of Accra, you will find yourself swept up in the bewitching call-and-response and tight highlife grooves.

Bronwyn Keith-Hynes *Fiddler's Pastime*. www.bronwynkeithhynes.com

The centerpiece is appropriately Bronwyn's superb fiddlin' but we are also talking an all-star supporting cast. For fans of virtuoso acoustic string band music that *swings*, this is an upbeat uplifting must! For a more bluegrass feel, check out the amazing debut release *Elements* from North Carolina-based **Fireside Collective**. Superb musicianship, terrific songwriting and sweet 3- and 4-part harmonies (Mountain Home Music Company). www.firesidecollectiveband.com

Kainani Kahaunale *Waipunalei* www.kainanikahaunale.com

Alas, we didn't get to Hawaii this year, so this virtual visit will have to suffice. This gorgeous selection of sultry traditional and original *mele* will transport you to the beach of your favorite Island at sunset, trade winds gently stirring the wave tops. Ono. Also recommended in a more uptempo mode: *He Mele No Papa* from **Kalani Miles** (Kalani Miles Music). Both can be ordered from the locally-owned source for Hawaiian Music: www.mele.com

Ladama *Oye Mujer*. www.ladamaproject.org

Second release from this exciting Pan-American all-female ensemble that blends South American and Caribbean rhythms like merengue, samba, and cumbia with progressive feminist political messages. Brazilian cool meets Venezuelan fire, and the results are thrillingly original.

Lettuce *Resonate*. Round Hill Records. <https://roundhillmusic.com>

But where is the *funk*? you ask. Well, it's right here, with another stellar release from these noted Masters of the genre, propelled by Adam Deitch's snappin' percussion and Nigel Hall's keyboards and vocals. Healing. Curative. Inspiring. I'd be remiss if I didn't also direct you to *Connection* (3 Palms Records) the latest from LA's own beloved **Orgone**. It is recommended that both these offerings be played at maximum possible volume! <https://www.orgonespace.com>

The Mastersons *No Time for Love Songs*. www.redhouserecords.com

Chris Masterson and Eleanor Whitmore, long-time backup singers for Steve Earle, step into the spotlight with this delightful solo debut, which showcases their melodic songwriting and instrumental chops and spellbinding vocal harmonies. Worthy of close attention from Americana/Tom Petty fans. Another favorite from Texas by way of Nashville is *Bright Lights, Long Drives, First Words*, the latest from noteworthy singer songwriter **Nora Jane Struthers** www.norajanestruthers.com

Sam Sweeney *unearth repeat*. (Hudson Records UK) <https://samsweeneymusic.com>

Well known on the UK trad scene, he's a singular violin talent that has a gift for transforming old tunes and traditional themes into captivating meditative contemporary soundscapes. If you're a fan of Brittany Haas and Hawktail, this is for you. Each listening brings forth new revelations. While we're in Celtic territory, let me also direct you to *Light Ida Lum*, the debut of **Haltadans**, an all-star ensemble from the Isle of Shetland that features a dynamic three fiddle attack and *demands* that you not sit still while listening. <https://www.haltadans.com>

The Texicana Mamas www.thetexicanamamas.com

Perhaps it was my formative years in New Mexico, but I've long held a deep affection for music of the *Frontera*, whether you call it *Conjunto*, *Tejano*, or *Tex Mex*. This inspired "super group" of favorite artists like Tish Hinojosa has crafted a timely, deeply soulful tribute to the spirit of the region and its peoples, recorded in places like McAllen and Kyle, TX. Build Bridges not Walls! Another noteworthy contemporary Frontera release (this time from Arizona) is *Curandero* from **Orkesta Mendoza** (Glitter Beat). <https://orkestamendoza.com>

Tomar and the FCs *Rise Above* (Splice Records) <https://tomarandthefcs.bandcamp.com>

From Austin, TX a legendary live performer who lives in the place where soul, blues and funk come together in a most remarkable fashion. You are guaranteed to be delighted that you made the journey to visit their home domain. Among the other denizens of that powerful vortex you'll also find **G.E. Smith and Leroy Bell** and colleagues doing business as *Stony Hill* <https://www.gesmithandleroybell.com>

Nora Jean Wallace *Blues Woman* www.severnrecords.com

This is a story of redemption, renewal and the rebirth of an extraordinary talent and a journey from the cotton fields of Mississippi to Chicago and back again. Much respect to the Severn label of Annapolis, MD., which has a history of offering just these sorts of opportunities to blues artists who have lived the stories they sing about. Grounded. Powerful. Essential. To wrap up the Blues theme that so appropriately captures 2020, I invite you to delight in *My Blues Journey* from **Kirk Fletcher**, Grand Master of the Stratocaster and powerful vocalist recorded in the unappreciated SFV Soul Center of Van Nuys, CA (www.cleopatrarrecords.com). Playing these discs *loud* will pay proper homage to the intent of these artists and maximize your listening enjoyment!

Lagniappe

Well, that's 10 (plus!) but one of the hallowed traditions of this annual exercise is to offer you a few more tasty items at no extra price, just as they do down in New Orleans.

I know some of you are asking... what about rock n' roll? My tastes are definitely retro, but fortunately there are still up-and-coming bands that (for me) embody the spirit of the classic late 60's and early 70's CA sound. Here are two that are definitely worth checking out:

Pacific Range *High Up on the Mountain* www.curationrecords.com

Robert Jon & The Wreck *Last Light on the Highway* www.robertjonandthewreck.com

Singular Voices: I also can't resist recommending these three *exceptional* Singer Songwriters:

Logan Ledger www.loganledgermusic.com www.rounder.com

Jono Manson. *Silver Moon.* www.jonomanson.com

Billy Traynor. *Beauty Inside Us.* <https://billytraynor.hearnow.com>

Finally, this year would have marked the 76th birthday of one of my all-time favorite artists, **Gene Clark**. He was a founding member of the Byrds and produced a distinguished body of music over his too-short life and career. Check out *Silver Raven*, a moving tribute from his son **Kai Clark** www.kaiclarkmusic.com